Netwatch

BY JIM CARROLL

YOUR GUIDE TO BUSINESS & ACCOUNTING ON THE INTERNET

One (workplace) wedding and a funeral

In last month's column, I suggested we're entering a new era in the workforce with the arrival of the millenials, or what I call Gen-Connect. This demographic shift raises the possibility of some unique cross-generational issues in the workplace.

Beyond having to amuse and entertain a group of highly interactive, collaborative staff, we'll also witness an acceleration of change as baby boomers retire. To put it bluntly, I think a lot of "change-aversion" will retire out the door and this has implications for industries, companies and the economy.

Take, for example, a fascinating video the University of Manitoba recently posted online, featuring the funeral of its mainframe computer. The university finally retired the IBM 650 it obtained in 1960. The statistics of the machine itself are amazing: almost 2,000 pounds, with another 3,000 pounds for the power unit and 1,300 more for the punch-card reader. When originally released, the monstrosity typically cost about $5,000 a month in rental fees.

A few months before U of M staged its memorial, reports appeared in the press about the first baby boomer in the US to officially draw a social security pension. There's a tight link between the two news stories, with direct implications on the rate of change that will unfold in the years to come. The two "retirements" are indicative of the departure from the economy of a generation that is resistant to change.

I believe a significant trend will unfold when the current leadership hands over the levers of power to GenX. As this happens, the rate of change in the economy, specific industries and the workplace will heat up. That's because the two generations deal with technology-induced change in inherently different ways.

Baby boomers learned COBOL and used punch cards in university; GenX was weaned on video games and PCs. The result is a dramatic difference of opinion as to the role of technology in business and in the way the two groups react to business models that are disrupted by technology.

Consider the comments of Universal Music CEO Doug Morris, who admitted that when it came to music piracy and the need for business model transformation, the record industry "just didn't know what to do. We didn't know who to hire." Staggering admissions for a senior executive in an industry in the throes of collapse.

It's probably unfair to suggest this is the typical reaction of a senior executive of the boomer generation; I've met and worked with many who embrace the impact of a massively interconnected global economy. Yet I've encountered dozens of others who would rather fight to preserve existing industry distribution structures (such as within the entertainment or auto industries, for example) than explore or experiment with radically new business models.

The next generation doesn't seem to have any such fear of the unknown — it aggressively pursues and implements new ideas. I recall an observation made by a woman in her mid-20s, who came up to me after a change management session I gave years ago: "I don't understand why people need change management workshops; we just change."

Which brings me to my key point: if there is a generational difference in attitude toward change, then there are benefits that can come from bringing together the insight and capabilities of those different generations. There's an extreme focus in the workplace right now on how to accommodate the unique work and career attitudes of the next generation. Beyond that, however, we need to learn how to combine the experience and wisdom of the boomers with the aggressive change attitude of the next generation. I call this the intergenerational collaborative capital index. If you can do it, you can successfully adapt to faster change.

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In Loving Memory of the Mainframe
http://umanitoba.ca/mainframe/index.php

Collaboration 2.0 http://marksblog.emc.com/2007/09/episode-54-coll.html